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2 | Roadside memorials from a geographical perspective ¹

Abstract

Roadside memorials are frequently visible in the Netherlands. Such a memorial marks a previously anonymous roadside, which is transformed into a place with special, even sacred, meanings to the bereaved, as it is the place where their loved one has died. We look at these memorials from a geographical point of view, i.e. we discuss the memorials as meaningful places. How do these places look, how do they function and what do they mean? We created a database consisting of information on more than 300 memorials, including photographs of about 150 of these and we interviewed 24 bereaved who established a memorial. The exact geographical location of the fatal traffic accident turns out to be crucial as it marks the ultimate transformative event that has taken place: from life to death. Temporary memorials are mainly established by friends, whereas parents construct more permanent ones. We argue that roadside memorials are part of wider communication networks. They provide a place for the bereaved to communicate not only with the deceased, but also with the outside world about what they consider a 'bad death'. Consequently, the establishment, maintenance and communication possibilities of roadside memorials constitute a way to give meaning to an otherwise senseless death.

2.1 Introduction

At the end of a summer day, Hilde and her partner David¹ leave their house with a small bouquet of pink flowers and a candle in their hands. They walk through the neighbourhood enjoying the peace and quiet. Their destination is a memorial bench built for Hilde's 6-year-old daughter Patricia at the spot where she was killed on 9 June 2004 in a traffic accident. When they arrive at the bench, Hilde lights the candle and places it with the flowers, Patricia's favourites, in the middle of the bench beneath an iron plate with Patricia's name and date of death. Hilde and David sit on either side of the iron plate. They experience a gamut of feelings ranging from sadness or anger to love. After some time the couple walks back home, but not without Hilde giving a hand-blown kiss to say goodbye.

¹ This chapter is reprinted from: Klaassens, M., Groote, P., & Huigen P.P.P. (2009). Roadside memorials from a geographical perspective. *Mortality* 14(2), 187-201.

The commemoration bench placed by Hilde and David is an example of a roadside memorial to mark the location of death, not the place where the body is laid to rest. Their story illustrates how roadside memorials have become places where rituals take place. Roadside memorials are frequently seen in the Netherlands (authors' database) and in other countries (Clark & Franzmann, 2006; Collins & Rhine, 2003; Doss, 2006; Hartig & Dunn, 1998; Reid & Reid, 2001; Ross, 1998). However, the phenomenon is not new. It is assumed that the erection of roadside memorials has origins in Latin American culture, or even dates back to Spain's conquest of the New World (Arrellano, 1986; Barrera, 1991). In recent times, it has attracted the attention of scholars and journalists, who argue that the practice has proliferated and gained in popularity in the last 10 to 15 years (e.g. Clark & Franzmann, 2006; Collins & Rhine, 2003; Doss, 2008; Owens, 2006; Smith, 2003).

According to Doss (2008, p. 7), today's commemorative sites represent 'memorial mania'; a shift in contemporary commemorative culture connected with changing attitudes in Western society regarding death, funerals and mourning rituals (see Clark & Franzmann, 2006; Haney, Leimer, & Lowery, 1997; Venbrux, 2007; Wouters, 2002). Death-negating practices seem to gradually give way to greater expressiveness in public mourning, surrounding famous people or disasters as well as roadside tributes (e.g. Howarth, 2007; Margry, 2003). Conspicuous spontaneous shrines were constructed in the Netherlands after the assassinations of politician Pim Fortuyn and film director Theo van Gogh (Doss, 2008; Margry, 2003).

In this article, we look at roadside memorials from a cultural geographical point of view. Since the 1990s, cultural geography has become almost synonymous with the analysis of place meanings; the way in which meanings are attached to places and the roles that such place meanings play in dealing with all matters of life. Such meanings, or rather the meaningful relations between the place and the agent allocating meaning to it or deriving meaning from it, is often labelled the sense of place (Ashworth & Graham, 2005). In his entry on sense of place in the Dictionary of Human Geography, Cosgrove (2000, p. 732) explicitly points out that complex senses of place may find material expression in markers, such as memorials.

The attachment between the bereaved and the places marked by a roadside memorial is used to explain why these memorials are established. The attachment is related to the appearance of such places: the design of the memorials and their geographical location. This means that we look at the location of memorials, the way meaning is produced through the design of the memorials, the way the memorials may function as locations for performative action and the consequent production and reproduction of (place) meanings.² Second, we try

to clarify how the memorials work. We argue that part of the answer can be found in the different possibilities of communication that roadside memorials provide.

2.2 Data and methodology

In the literature two methods have been used to record roadside memorials. The first one is bottom-up and consists of a large scale search of the sites where fatal road accidents have occurred (see Hartig & Dunn, 1998; Reid & Reid, 2001). This method is very time-consuming. Although accident rates are relatively low in the Netherlands, one would still have to visit about 700 sites of accidents per year to inspect whether or not a memorial has been constructed. The second method is top-down. It implies enlisting the help of the ‘eyes and ears’ of a wider audience, consisting for example of students, colleagues and the general public. Key informants of institutional organisations (road owners or road maintenance workers; municipalities) can be targeted specifically. However, in the Netherlands roadside memorials are hardly ever officially registered.³

We applied the top-down method. In first instance, we performed an Internet search. A web site named ‘silent witnesses’ (<http://www.stillegetuigen.nl>) lists about 30 roadside memorials.⁴ In some cases it contained information about the location and the victims, but often specific information was not available. Other websites, dedicated to individual victims of traffic accidents, provided pictures and stories of the establishment of a memorial. Comments of others in the guestbooks of these sites or at forums and web logs led to additional memorials. The Dutch-language television program ‘I Miss You’ (<http://www.eo.nl/ikmisje>), in which people share memories of a deceased loved one, provided more information about roadside memorials.⁵ Also, newspapers were searched to find articles about (the construction of) memorials.

Then we tried to mobilise as many external ‘eyes and ears’ as possible to report on any roadside memorial they were acquainted with. Personal and professional networks, i.e. friends, family members, colleagues and their respective networks, were asked for help and the majority were very cooperative. By calling upon the general public, through broadcasts on regional and national radio, these networks were enlarged and diversified. An article on roadside memorials in a glossy magazine *Esta* (Bartels, 2007) ended with an appeal to email locations of roadside memorials to our research team. Several people who set up roadside memorials emailed and informed us about their memorial. One must be aware, however, that this way our group of respondents might be biased, as the respondents apparently did not object to communicate about what happened, otherwise (1) they would not have established a roadside memorial, (2) we would not be able to find them or (3) they would not have agreed to be interviewed.

This resulted in a database of more than 300 locations of roadside memorials, which were mapped in GIS software (ESRI's ARCGIS 9.2). If the accident had occurred after the year 2000, we could compare the location to a GIS database of fatal traffic incidents.⁶ As was to be expected, a neighbourhood effect was visible in the data collection processes. In our database, we have more complete information on memorials at shorter distances to our university and our networks of information providers. Nevertheless, the effect seemed surprisingly small. There was no indication that the neighbourhood effect would influence the analysis, as we did not find any differences in the characteristics of close by memorials vis-a-vis those further off. Nor did religious or urban-rural characteristics seem to influence the spatial distribution of the memorials in our sample.

The next step consisted of adding information to the database of the corresponding narratives of the accidents, the victims, the design and construction of the memorials. In some cases, this was already supplied by those reporting about the memorial. Moreover, two sources were very helpful in providing information. First, the memorials themselves. We tried to visit as many of them as possible, in order to ascertain the design and to check whether they included any information on the victims and/or the accident. Images of approximately 50% of the memorials were collected by photographing the visited roadside memorials and by using imagery from newspapers and websites, which allowed us to perform content analysis. Often names and dates were written on the memorials, allowing us to include the year of accident, the sex of the victim (often derived from the name) and his/her age. Second, the electronic and printed archives of newspapers and press agencies proved very informative. If either the location of a memorial was known, or the accident date, it was often possible to find a short description of the accident, including the age and sex of the victims. This way, we were able to fill in information on date of accident, and age and sex of victims for 71% of the cases.

Through the information in the database, several bereaved who constructed memorials were traced and invited to participate in the research. Sometimes the interviewees knew others who could be interviewed. We interviewed 24 people who maintained a memorial; 22 of these had also constructed it.⁷ These interviews capture the stories and motivations behind the construction of roadside memorials and the meanings attached to the place where the fatal accident occurred.

2.3 Roadside memorials described

When looking at the design of roadside memorials, two types can be distinguished: spontaneous and permanent ones. Almost all start as a spontaneous memorial of a temporary nature. It is created at the time of the accident, which suggests a spur-of-the-moment act. Therefore, people have not applied for official permission, and formally the memorial may be

considered illegal. It is constructed with items that are available at the time, such as flowers, candles, teddy bears, personal notes and mementos. These spontaneous memorials are mainly constructed by friends of the victim. Over time, the memorial may disappear through decay or removal. However, the memorial can also be expanded or replaced by a more permanent one. This often happens several months after the accident. The permanent type of memorial will survive longer and is frequently build by the parents of the victim. Many are legal and permitted by the authorities for a number of years. It is unclear how long permanent memorials last, although our database suggests 7 years on average.

The link between types of memorials (spontaneous vs. permanent) and persons involved (friends vs. parents) has not been made before in the literature (e.g. Clark & Franzmann, 2006; Everett, 2002; Hartig & Dunn, 1998; Henzel, 1995). Friends seem to have a more pressing and urgent need to memorialise the event of the accident and the loss, whereas parents seem to memorialise the deceased in a more enduring way. This is underlined by many of our interviewees who stated that losing a loved one is hard, but it is even more difficult when it is one's own child. It could be speculated, but would need separate research, that the contrast between both types of memorials correspond to what Riches and Dawson (1997, p. 59) have called 'identity orientations' of the parents trying to cope with the loss of a child. Riches and Dawson's description of 'sub-cultural alternation' focuses on parents' rejection of the mainstream suggestion that 'life goes on,' a sentiment that friends and relatives may proffer as well. Instead these parents believe that life has changed forever. The erection of a permanent memorial would reinforce and communicate this idea.

2.4 Design

In Mexico, the USA, Australia and New Zealand, permanent memorials in the form of crosses or crucifixes are the standard (e.g. Clark & Franzmann, 2006; Everett, 2000, 2002; Henzel, 1995; Owens, 2006; Reid & Reid, 2001). The design of Dutch roadside memorials differs from this standard. They are not uniform in style and size; representing a wide range of creativity. Of the 150 photographed memorials, only 17% uses a cross. A suggested explanation for this is that Protestant areas generally lack religious iconography (Henzel, 1995; Jordan & Rowntree, 1990). Twenty-four percent of the memorials are characterised by a commemorative plaque, for 17% a tree is the primary structure, 10% are shaped in the form of a rock and 32% do not employ the forms just described.

The most common detail of the memorials is the first name of the deceased. Of the sites, 61% carried the first name of the deceased. This indicates the importance of giving the site a personal character, "of expressing the deceased's identity and social person" (Pettersson, 2005, p. 3). At only 29% of the sites, the last name was inscribed. A small number of the

interviewees had their own names engraved. Monique, who memorialised her husband, had her name and those of her children inscribed on a cross. She explained, “I was determined to have our names on the memorial. He is part of us, but we also belong to him.” The date of death is more often mentioned on a memorial (57%) than the date of birth (39%). This emphasises the character of these memorials as final places or death sites. Texts were found at 41% of the sites, in the form of personal messages, poems, as well as inscriptions normally found on headstones in graveyards. Flowers (66%), candles or lamps (45%) and personal objects (46%) were very common, which personalise the space and are evidence that these locations are more than ordinary spaces. Beside the main structures described earlier, objects in the shapes of butterflies (15%) and hearts (13%) were remarkable (Klaassens, Groote, & Huigen, 2008). The material structure and symbols of Dutch roadside memorials seem to symbolise victimhood, vulnerability, transitoriness, innocence and tenderness, which may be thought to communicate about a ‘bad death.’ In contrast, Hartig and Dunn (1998, p. 5) concluded in their study of roadside memorials in Newcastle, NSW, Australia, that the memorials “(. . .) function as conservative memorials of youth machismo; of heroic aggression, disregard for safety and egocentrism.” Objects involved with the collision and personal belongings were included in the Australian memorials and serve symbolically as masculine artifacts of death. Also, references to the use of alcohol are relatively frequent: empty beer cans, glasses, favourite brand names, etc. These items are also reported from memorial sites in the USA, UK and New Zealand (Clark & Franzmann, 2006; Morrison, 2005; Reid & Reid, 2001). In the Dutch context, the relative lack of symbols that refer to a fast and risky life, such as part of the vehicle or symbols that relate to alcohol and drug use, is striking; only 10% of the memorials in honour of male victims contains such symbols and only 1% of the female ones. Apparently, toughness or heroism plays a minor role within the material culture of these memorials.

Does this relative lack in the Netherlands of symbolism celebrating the heroic deaths of traffic casualties indeed mean that Dutch roadside memorials above all symbolise what has been labelled a ‘bad death’? We follow Seale and Van der Geest (2004) in their description of good and bad deaths, although many other definitions of the good death in contemporary Western societies exist (Hart, Sainsbury & Short, 1998; Kellehear, 1990; Seale, 1998), as well as a great variety across cultures (and over time) in people’s explanations for why death must occur, and in perceptions of what it is to die well or badly. Seale and Van der Geest (2004) conclude that there are specific similarities in death perceptions across cultures and times. A good death occurs “after a long and successful life, at home, without violence or pain, with the dying person being at peace with this environment and having at least some control over events” (Seale & Van der Geest, 2004, p. 885). In particular, where modern societies have

apparently been successful in controlling circumstances surrounding death, there seems to be an increasing need for spontaneous memorialisation to deal with those cases where death occurs suddenly, unexpectedly and violently without warning and opportunity for closures (see Collins & Rhine, 2003; Howarth, 2007; Weisser, 2004). Therefore, we consider all the traffic deaths as bad deaths, irrespective of the questions of guilt or purpose.

Almost 75% of the roadside memorials in our database are established for victims 25 years of age or younger, whereas about one-third of the traffic deaths comprise victims of this age group (see Table 1). We did a logistic regression analysis, with the log odds of having a memorial erected as the dependent variable, and the year of the accident and the age and sex of the victim as independent variables. The cases included are all traffic deaths in the Netherlands over the period 1987–2006 (N = 22,912). The results confirm that the younger a victim is, the more likely it is that (s)he is memorialised. The variable age is statistically significant (p-value 0.00) with a coefficient of -0.056. This means that the odds of having a memorial erected decrease by around 5.5% for every additional year in terms of age.

Table 1. Statistics on traffic deaths (source: Stichting Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek Verkeersveiligheid, 2008) and roadside memorials (source: authors' database), average per year over the period 1997–2007

Age group	Fatal casualties			Number of roadside memorials			Memorials/casualties		
	male	female	total	male	female	total	male	female	total
0–17	61	36	97	3.7	3.6	7.4	6%	10%	8%
18–29	212	47	260	11.5	2.4	13.9	5%	5%	5%
30–60	255	76	333	3.9	1.5	5.4	2%	2%	2%
60+	159	95	255	0.5	0.2	0.6	0%	0%	0%
total	687	254	946	19.6	7.6	27.3	3%	3%	3%

Note: Total including unknown sex or age

When we look at the sex of the memorialised victims, we see that a higher number of memorials are erected for male victims. In our database of memorials, out of the 350 persons of whom the sex is known, 72% are male. However, this does not mean that it is more likely that a memorial will be erected to commemorate a male victim, as more men die in traffic accidents as well (average over 1987–2006: 72%), and other variables (for example, age) may play an intervening role. The regression suggests indeed that the odds of being memorialised are 24% higher for females, although the coefficient is not statistically significant (p-value of 0.122). However, this does not mean that it is more likely that a memorial will be erected to

commemorate a male victim, as more men die in traffic accidents as well (average over 1987–2006: 72%), and other variables (for example, age) may play an intervening role. The regression suggests indeed that the odds of being memorialised are 24% higher for females, although the coefficient is not statistically significant (p-value of 0.122).

2.5 Roadside memorials situated

The establishment of the memorials has a strong geographical background. Literally, it is only ‘in place’ at the site of the accident and ‘out of place’ anywhere else. Annet stated: “This is the place where he died, where he was for the last time. This is his place.” As the issue of placement and place is critical to the bereaved, a great majority of the respondents placed the memorial at the exact location of death or as close as possible. Nico, who lost his two daughters and unborn grandchild, explained: “Because it’s about that place, not somewhere else. When it’s located a kilometre further on, it doesn’t make any sense. Then you can also remove it. At that spot, they drove into the ditch.” The importance of placing the memorial at the spot of the accident is underlined by the protracted discussions that a number of bereaved had with local authorities. In some cases they have met with objections from the authorities because of safety issues concerning passers-by and visitors. A ritual of Wouter, the father of a 16-year-old victim, emphasises the importance of place. Whenever he visits the memorial, situated at the roadside, he lays a solitary flower in the middle of the road, the spot where his son died. For a small number of interviewees, marking the exact location means visiting it less than they would have wanted to because the location was dangerous or too open and visible. The importance of individual memorials at the place of accident is confirmed by the respondents rejecting the alternative idea of a general monument in memory of traffic deaths. To quote Willem, “I really don’t like that. What is the use of a monument at one spot, whereas the accidents occur everywhere? [. . .] It should be in the area where it happened.”

Owens (2006) discusses the distance between death site and family home. She concludes that a memorial is likely to be placed when the death occurred in the vicinity of the family’s home (see Löwer, 1999), and especially when the bereaved pass the site periodically. This way, the roadside memorials are placed into everyday life as it is being lived. The average distance between Dutch roadside memorials and the homes of the respondents who constructed it was a little more than 10 kilometres.⁸ This indicates that roadside memorials are embedded within a local context. However, there are exceptions. Sander and Pauline, who lost their 18-year-old daughter, constructed a memorial almost 100 kilometers from their home. They hated the idea that she died far from home, without them being there. They visit it about four times a year. Sander explains:

When we go there, the trunk is filled with a spade, fork, compost, peat, water, bulbs. I also bring stuffed animals and flowers to be absolutely safe. We drive two hours there and back, so it takes us a whole afternoon.

Their story illustrates that long distances can also be partly the reason for establishing a memorial.

2.6 Private or public?

The memorials may evoke tensions between private versus public interests (Everett, 2000; Kong, 1999). Mourners often assume that they can construct a memorial for private purposes in a public place for as long as they need it there. This stems from three main elements of experience: “the overwhelming empowerment of grief; the belief that the presence of the deceased can be felt and recognised; and the understanding that the place where life was lost is a special place for memorialisation” (Clark & Franzmann, 2006, p. 579). Most respondents experience their roadside memorial as a public instead of a private place, as passersby can see and visit it.

This may lead to conflicts between mourners, the public and officials. Not all the members of the public may recognise the location of the memorial as sacred ground (Everett, 2002; Tuan, 1996). Jose, who lost her 22-year-old son, heard people complaining: “When will that tourist attraction go away? We [Jose] were there every night and they [the others] thought it disturbing. I was really angry, it was very disrespectful.” The memorials can even be vandalised or destroyed. Marry, who placed a stone for her 17-year-old son, told us: “At ours, once something went missing, but I assume that it had been blown away. I can’t believe that someone would take it away from there.” Some respondents argued that as the victim was very well known in their community, they did not expect vandalism.

Tensions with officials occur as Ross (1998, p. 50) argues: “in probably no other area of public life [i.e. in the placement of roadside memorials] does public practice diverge so dramatically from official policy.” Within the Netherlands, policies regarding roadside memorials are not uniform, but differ as several parties function as road owners: the national government (Rijkswaterstaat or the Dutch Directorate for Public Works and Water Management), provinces, municipalities, and in a few cases waterboards or private parties. In 2004 the national government issued some general guidelines to regulate the establishment of roadside memorials, but these had no binding legal power for other road owners. The main points of the guidelines were that permission from the road owner would be necessary and that permission could be granted for a limited period (3 or 5 years) only. Memorials should not jeopardise the safety of road users, but this was already accounted for in existing traffic laws.

Some lower level governments follow the national guide lines, others do not. At times respondents experienced warm support from the local government, whereas others experienced problems as there were no prescribed rules. One father, Henk, stated that he was happy that a policy had been formulated. He believed that this made it easier to set up his memorial, as the municipality would now need objective arguments to reject his request.

In many cases the respondents did not know which authority to address, or consciously decided not to apply for permission. Of the memorials of the 24 interviewed, 14 have legal consent from the government. The other 10 have not, which indicates that the authorities are tolerant, as at the time of the interviews, the illegal memorials did exist already for about 3 years on average. The two main reasons seem to be ethical and pragmatic in nature. Governments are in doubt as to whether they have the informal, ethical right to interfere in matters that seem of so fundamental a nature to the bereaved. At the other end of the spectrum, on the very pragmatic side, they foresee problems for their employees who, in case no official permission was obtained, would have to communicate with the parents and act accordingly. The province of Noord-Brabant, for example, had originally followed the national guidelines, but in 2008 it decided to withdraw and not interfere with the placement of roadside memorials anymore, as it did not want to force its employees to remove memorials for which no licence was obtained (Timmers, 2008).

Some interviewees knew of the strict policies of local governments. Marry did not ask for permission as she feared rejection: “Yes, that is what I’m told by other people not to ask for permission, because they will say no. Just do it, then it will be tolerated.” She was of the opinion that the local authorities tolerated it: “Even the municipality, which takes care of the grass, mows around the stone. Which gives me the impression that they even take care of it.” Willem, whose friend died in a car accident, submitted a request, pretending to be a stepbrother, to improve his chances of approval. In fact, only one interviewee was forced to remove the memorial, as there were complaints from neighbours about the conspicuous nature of the memorial. Ironically, the municipality itself had prescribed a minimum size for the memorial, as it wanted to avoid difficulties when mowing the roadside.

2.7 How roadside memorials work

The interviews illustrate that the primary reason for establishing a roadside memorial is to honour and commemorate a loved one who died. According to Tiny, who lost her 17-year-old son, “You’re occupied with leaving traces of his existence; that people keep talking and thinking of him.” Marking the site of tragedy is also essential, but it can be seen as a part of keeping the memory of the victim alive. Marijke, who placed a commemoration plaque for her brother said: “For us, that place is loaded with emotional value and with grief. We wanted to

mark that and show it.” Another reason for establishment is to warn the public. In the interviews, however, this emerged as a secondary rationale only. Only two respondents stated this as their main motive, while many others mentioned this as an afterthought. One respondent placed a sign at the memorial with a text of protest, referring to the pain and suffering that carelessness in traffic causes to people and animals. Several interviewees placed the memorial as a protest against what happened. Especially when another person’s act of wanton carelessness or intoxication causes the death of a loved one, it is hard for the bereaved to accept.

These motives relate to different forms of communication. Memorialised places can be seen as settings for social interaction and performative events, directed to different audiences. We argue that roadside memorials are part of a wider communication network with different agents involved. As Habermas (1987, p. 52) stated: “[R]itual practice serves to bring about communion in a communicative fashion.” Ritual performances can only work if they are communicated to insiders as well as outsiders. The same seems to hold true for roadside memorials. These may range from the very intimate ties of the deceased herself/himself to the general public. At the memorial, the bereaved may communicate with their departed loved one. Hilde, mentioned earlier, talks with her deceased daughter at the roadside memorial: “Sometimes, I communicate with her at that place. It depends a little on whether there are people around. Otherwise I do not talk aloud to her.” Some bereaved do flash their car lights or honk their horn when they pass the memorial as a way of greeting the deceased. Saskia, who lost her husband, said “When I leave the site, I ring my bicycle bell.”

The memorial is also a way to communicate with other bereaved. Through the placement of personal items at the site or by maintaining it, others see that the site is visited and that the deceased is not forgotten. In some cases, this contact occurs in a very practical way. Joke, a mother of a 19-year-old traffic victim, wanted to place a note at the memorial to get in contact with her daughter’s old classmate who earlier had left a butterfly ornament and note at the site. The classmate’s note was a way to communicate with her deceased friend as the message was directly addressed to her. Another mother, Marry, found an invitation for the national day of remembrance for road traffic victims at the memorial site. This fits our previous suggestion about the applicability of Riches and Dawson’s (1997, p. 59) ideas of ‘sub-cultural alternation identity orientation.’ They suggest that bereaved parents may become closely involved in networks with other, like-minded people, for example, in self-help groups. In this way they can continue to communicate their loss and share in comparable losses of other people. The memorial can also be erected to communicate feelings of anger. The daughter of Marja was killed by a tractor in front of the house of the farmer responsible for the accident. She set up a memorial with a large picture of her daughter and explained:

It has to do with the trial. As we never received any expression of regret from the responsible person, we try to make the memorial very noticeable. That way, we hope that she will be reminded of what she has done and what harm she caused us. If we receive some sign of acknowledgement, we will probably reduce the size the memorial.

The memorials, which are situated in public space, “invite participation from others, even from strangers. They are open to the public” (Santino, 2004, p. 369). Some bereaved have been approached by strangers, while they were cleaning or maintaining the roadside memorial, or in their daily life, for example at work. When passers-by are confronted with these markers of death, it communicates to them that a road trauma has occurred at that spot. Through the memorial, the bereaved send a message out into the world and are able to communicate about the deceased (Reid & Reid, 2001). Jan-Willem, father of a 20-year-old victim, said: “When it just happened and we were there, at the roadside memorial, even the bus drivers drove by slowly.” Janet, his wife, added that it was ‘very respectful.’ The different ways of communication are part of the bereavement as the bereaved are able to communicate about a bad death and they feel that their loved ones are not forgotten.

The most important part of communication between bereaved and deceased at the memorial illustrates the belief that the presence of the deceased can be felt. This is a strong expression of the sense of place, which is a crucial concept in understanding why roadside memorials are established. Without the memorial serving as a marker of this sense of place, it would not function in this way (Tuan, 1996). For some bereaved, these places have a sacred meaning; they function as holy ground (Clark & Franzmann, 2006; Everett, 2000; Larson-Miller, 2005). Roadside memorials are also known as micro sacred sites (Weisser, 2004), and their construction as a type of popular religious activity (Larson-Miller, 2005). This is confirmed by interviewees referring to the memorial as an altar or a pilgrimage site. Most interviewees visit the roadside memorial regularly. According to Collins and Rhine (2003), repeated visits to roadside memorials are related to site-sacredness and can be considered to be ‘pilgrimage-like.’ Several of the bereaved keep a candle burning, which makes them go to their memorial almost every day. To quote Janet, “The candle is a symbol: we think of you.” During the visits, maintaining the site plays a large role. On ‘special days’ such as the date of death/birth, more attention is paid to the decorations. The interviews revealed a whole range of ritualised or communicative practices. Jan-Willem and Janet planted bulbs in such a way that it spelt their daughter’s name. Near Patricia’s bench, bushes with pink flowers which blossom around the date of the accident are planted. Others told stories about smoking a joint or

drinking a Breezer at the memorial. Jose even held a barbeque at the place of death, as her deceased son always wanted to have one.

In many cases emotions such as anger, sadness and pain are experienced, related to the bad death that occurred at the spot. Therefore, there are some who in spite of having established memorials hardly ever visit the site. In some cases the accident was described as needless. Tiny stated, "To us, that place is a very painful place." Her husband Wouter added, "For me, anger and a tremendous pain dominates. When I'm there, I realise that the end of his life was so awful. And the fact that to me it was an unnecessary death." Positive associations are also possible, as the loved ones are remembered, the sites provide possibilities for communication, and give the opportunity to take action. The best friend of a 20-year-old victim has maintained a memorial. He was driving the car, when he and the victim crashed. By maintaining the memorial, he feels that he is able to 'do something' for his deceased friend. The feelings experienced at the site may change through time. Annet: "Initially I hated that road along the canal. Now, I've started to see it as his place."

The roadside memorials may carry sacred meanings for others as well. In one case, an immigrant neighbour who is a relative stranger is known to stop and pray whenever he passes the site. Cobie, who erected a memorial for her deceased husband Tom, knows that her mother-in-law visits the site as well, although they have had no contact for 15 years. She recounted:

On his birthday, they were the first who visited the memorial. Maybe they went there the night before; to avoid meeting us . . . Maybe the place has become important for her as well, for my mother-in-law, although she did not set it up.

The driver who was involved in the collision asked:

. . . if it was OK for him to visit the memorial. He wanted to know what kind of person Tom was and what kind of music he liked. He parked his car at the roadside memorial, played the music and said goodbye in his own way.

The interviewees say that they want to have the memorial as long as they need it as a place of remembrance, ritual and communication. The construction, visits to and maintenance of these places play a central role in their lives and in their grief process. To quote Hilde who erected a memorial bench for her daughter: "We have a moment of peace at the bench. If I didn't have the bench, it would feel like a great loss in the whole process. It is part of my life."

2.8 Conclusion

For the bereaved, the construction, visits and maintenance of a roadside memorial is a way to grieve and cope with the death of a loved one. From the interviews, it appears that the practices and activities performed at the spot are effective rituals. Immediately after the accident the bereaved fill a gap in their existence by doing something, through which their loved ones are remembered. For the bereaved, the exact place where the victim was last alive matters most. At that spot, the seemingly nondescript public roadside changed into an intense private place of grief. The possibilities of communication that the memorial provides are part of the ritual. The design of these assemblages is diverse, accentuating the personal character of the commemoration site. The style of Dutch roadside memorials emphasises the bad and therefore unacceptable deaths of victims who were too young to die and who met such a violent death away from home. This message is shown to the rest of the world by constructing a roadside memorial, which helps the bereaved to cope with otherwise senseless deaths.

Notes

- [1] The names of the interviewees are fictitious in order to ensure anonymity.
- [2] Our geographical perspective is based on Foote, Hugill, Mathewson, and Smith (1994) and Agnew (1987). Foote et al. distinguished three main themes of research within cultural geography: how the world looks, how the world works and what the world means. Agnew (1987) constituted three interrelated elements of place: geographical location, the locale which deals with places as settings for social interaction and the sense of place.
- [3] For this study, we only searched for people that constructed a memorial. Further research is required to say more about the bereaved that decided not to build one.
- [4] <http://www.stillegetuigen.nl> Retrieved April 17, 2008.
- [5] <http://www.eo.nl/ikmisje> Retrieved April 17, 2008.
- [6] Kindly supplied by AVV Transport Research Centre of the Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management.
- [7] The authors would like to thank Vincent Breen for his part in conducting interviews.
- [8] The average distance between the roadside memorial and the family homes is measured over the road network (N = 21, SD = 33.21, Median = 5.3).

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